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Still Life and Trade in the Dutch Golden Age by Julie Berger Hochstrasser

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Julie Berger Hochstrasser. *Still Life and Trade in the Dutch Golden Age*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007. xviii + 412 pp. index. append. illus. bibl. \$40. ISBN: 978-0-300-10038-9.

Why do we have pictures of cheese and beer so lovingly described — every hole and hunk, each curious fly and speck of foam? What an unlikely inheritance we have received. In *Still Life and Trade in the Dutch Golden Age* Julie Berger Hochstrasser has rescued the independent “laid table” still life from both pictorial finger-wagging and dexterous compass-wielding — from both iconology and description — to explore its sociohistorical context. With a prodigious amount of research Hochstrasser has examined the trading histories of the objects in the pictures that brought them to the Dutch table, deploying an arsenal of fascinating facts, likely unknown to the art historian, in an attempt to flesh out the relationship between representation and consumption raised by scholars like Norman Bryson and Hal Foster. For Hochstrasser argues quite simply that trade affected meaning. These were visual missives from the merchant, not the preacher, and moreover they were the product of an eager pride in trade. If there is any hidden message, it is that an object is never an innocuous bystander and still life does indeed have a narrative. In fact, these are portraits, because Hochstrasser discloses their secret lives, showing how commodities — like cheese, beer, and herring on the domestic side and spices, tobacco, and lemons on the foreign front — entered, entranced, and ultimately exited the pictorial stage.

The book is divided into two parts. In part 1, “Trade Secrets,” Hochstrasser treats the history of trade in a given pictured commodity, starting with domestic products (butter, cheese, herring, beer) and then moving to pan-European products (bread, lemons and oranges, figs and raisins, hazelnuts, wine), Dutch East India Company products (pepper and spices, Chinese porcelain, tea), and Dutch West India Company products (salt, tobacco, and, most dehumanizing, slaves). It is worth mentioning that the inclusion of slaves in the last category effectively brings home the sheer horror of listing slaves as yet another object. Hochstrasser almost seems to substitute the traditional developmental scheme of still life painting from additive to monochrome to *pronk*, or luxurious, with a structure that stretches from local to continental to cross-oceanic as the Dutch burgher moved from satisfaction in the abundance of local provision to delicacies from increasingly further afield. With a population heavily invested in trade, she convincingly explains the new market for these pictures and how they could be viewed as a trophy prize of labor, an origin of fortune, or a vehicle of wealth. Food was served up with pride, without judgment and largely without incrimination.

To Hochstrasser's mind, however, there were some guilty parties. In part 2, "The Language of Commodities," she seeks to locate a critical access point for understanding the exploitation behind the production of the objects pictured. This she finds in Karl Marx's definition of the value of a commodity as the social labor expended in its production. By arguing for understanding these images as a form of "pictorial capitalism" (241), Hochstrasser sees them as an example *par excellence* of Marx's definition of bourgeois accumulation. But Marx need not necessarily be invoked to remind us of the value of remembering the tremendous social costs of making the scenes seem flawless and consumption so very palatable. And although her warning for today's world — that it was precisely the same omissions, denials, and oversights that built the success of the Golden Age that ensured its demise — is controversial, surely all would agree with Hochstrasser that the realistic style of these paintings fails to account for their panoply of real-life meanings and that the history of trade concealed as much as it made manifest.

This book is exquisitely produced and an eye for detail is shared with the viewer in large blow-ups that begin each chapter. Particularly helpful are the extensive bibliography and appendices of excerpts (with translations) of a creative range of important primary sources, including selections from a health manual, a tax code, an ethical guide for overseas merchant trading, a West India Company pamphlet, and lists of booty from the *Hollandsche Mercurius*. Those early traders — both stalwart and rogue — still have much to teach us, and it is to Hochstrasser's great credit that she has brought the merchant trader back into the picture to remind us of both the dream and the dark side of the Golden Age. Celebration or censure, a picture of cheese is never simply that.

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